

Book Club in a Bag

Discussion Questions

“A remarkable, laugh-out-loud book... Rarely has the subject of elder care produced such droll human comedy, or a heroine quite on the mettlesome order of Betty Baker Hodgman. For as much as the book works on several levels (as a meditation on belonging, as a story of growing up gay and the psychic cost of silence, as metaphor for recovery), it is the strong-willed Betty who shines through.”

- *The New York Times*

Bettyville | George Hodgman



Kalamazoo
Public Library

kpl.gov/book-club-in-a-bag



George Hodgman is a veteran magazine and book editor who has worked at Simon & Schuster, Vanity Fair, and Talk magazine. His writing has appeared in Entertainment Weekly, Interview, W, and Harper's Bazaar, among other publications. He lives in New York City and Paris, Missouri.

Book Summary

A witty, tender memoir of a son's journey home to care for his irascible mother—a tale of secrets, silences, and enduring love.

When George Hodgman leaves Manhattan for his hometown of Paris, Missouri, he finds himself—an unlikely caretaker and near-lethal cook—in a head-on collision with his aging mother, Betty, a woman of wit and will. Will George lure her into assisted living?

When hell freezes over. He can't bring himself to force her from the home both treasure—the place where his father's voice lingers, the scene of shared jokes, skirmishes, and, behind the dusty antiques, a rarely acknowledged conflict: Betty, who speaks her mind but cannot quite reveal her heart, has never really accepted the fact that her son is gay.

As these two unforgettable characters try to bring their different worlds together, Hodgman reveals the challenges of Betty's life and his own struggle for self-respect, moving readers from their small town—crumbling but still colorful—to the star-studded corridors of Vanity Fair. Evocative of *The End of Your Life Book Club* and *The Tender Bar*, Hodgman's debut is both an indelible portrait of a family and an exquisitely told tale of a prodigal son's return. (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

1. Where, or what, is "Bettyville?" Describe your equivalent of Bettyville.
2. "The highway between Madison and Moberly will always be one of the places where I will see my mother, hair wrapped in rollers under a scarf, wearing a pair of sunglasses, taking me off into the big wide world." Why do you think this image resonated so much with George? Do you have a favorite memory of your parents from childhood?
3. Have you ever assumed the role of caregiver for someone in your life? How did your experience compare to George's? Should he have coerced Betty into assisted living? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think George decided to stay in Paris? What would you have done?
5. What lessons does George learn while taking care of Betty? Does Betty learn any lessons as well?
6. How does George's relationship with his parents change throughout his life?
7. "By the time my mother realized that she was smart or saw she had the kind of looks that open doors, she had already closed too many to go back." How do you think this affected Betty's disposition? Do you think a lot of women of her generation shared this experience?
8. Betty once took care of her own mother after she broke her hip: "I do not know if Betty's sorrow stemmed from her mother's loss of independence or her own." How do you think Betty's earlier training as a caregiver might affect her feelings now that she is the care-receiver?
9. How does our sense of "home" change with time, as we leave the place we are born? What does it feel like to return?
10. "If I were starting a Betty Museum, I would make an exhibit out of the sandals with their worn, thin straps and soles indented with my mother's dark footprints." What exhibits would be in your parents' museum?
11. George describes how his hometown is "vanishing," with small businesses boarded up to make way for big box stores. How has your town changed over the years? Are we better or worse for these changes? What is lost or gained?